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Journalism under (ideological) threat: safeguarding and enhancing public service media into the 21st century

Over the course of the twentieth century, public service broadcasters helped forge important professional and regulatory standards in broadcasting (Cushion, 2012). Most have sought to promote values of accuracy and fairness in news reporting, creating editorial codes that aim to produce impartial, objective and balanced journalism. However problematic these terms are in practice, they represent an *attempt* to mitigate partisanship, state interference and market-pressures. While many public service broadcasters grew up with limited competition, by the end of the twentieth century they competed in an increasingly crowded commercial media marketplace. Although the size and scope of public service broadcasting differs cross-nationally, collectively they have maintained an important influence in journalism across many advanced Western democracies. They have evolved in the digital age, moving from public service broadcasting to media, expanding their journalism online and supplying news across social media platforms.

However, nearly two decades into the twenty-first century the digital age has also brought many challenges that undermine the role, relevance and credibility of public service media. To mark the twentieth anniversary of *Journalism*, I focus on two inter-connected risks: *cuts to funding and a more aggressive ideological attack on their independence*. Overall, it is argued that the diminishing level of funding for public service media – driven by a more ideologically hostile political and media environment – represents a serious threat to the long-term survival of public service media.

Since broadcasting has been publicly funded, there have always been debates about the amount – more or less – they should receive. But over recent decades, the broad evidence has shown funding cuts or freezes for most national broadcasters, representing a slow and steady decline in their resources. In Europe – historically the strongest region for investment in public service broadcasting – the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) (2017) recently discovered some striking cuts in funding. In the last five years, for example, VRT in Belgium had a 7.0% reduction in resources, while in Ukraine a dramatic 39.3% fall was recorded (EBU, 2017: 4). In the UK it is estimated that between 2015 and 2020 there will be a 20% cut in spending on BBC resources. In the US, where public funding in broadcasting has historically been very low, the terms of the debate have recently focussed on the government *eliminating* federal spending. Among other factors, this is driven by an ideological resistance to public media, which is widely seen as liberal and left-wing by many Republican or independent politicians and political parties (Powers, 2018). More generally, as right-wing parties and populist politicians have grown in size and influence, many public service broadcasters – notably in Europe – have had their journalistic independence more vociferously attacked. Some governments have sought to exercise more control and power over regulatory arrangements, which were previously introduced to police independence. There have also been more subtle forms of indirect governmental influence, such as in the UK where a 10 year BBC licence fee was agreed just after the Conservative party had secured an unexpected majority to govern. In other words, there was a pressure to conform to a funding deal when the government was at its most powerful during the election cycle.

However, the independence of public service media is threatened by more than the ideological motives of political parties. They have long been subject to sustained criticism by commercial competitors who believe they gain an unfair competitive advantage by benefitting from guaranteed sources of public income. As a consequence, news produced by public service media is held to a far higher standard in debates about editorial standards than that reported by the market. Yet this scrutiny has been enhanced over recent years by a growing army of new and aggressive online critics that have large followings on social

media. While enhanced scrutiny of news reporting can help develop media literacy skills among audiences, the tone and agenda being pursued by some sites threatens to undermine the independence of public service media. Take, for example, public scepticism towards the BBC's coverage of Brexit. While many people in the UK have long mistrusted partisan coverage of politics in national newspapers, their main impartial source of news – the BBC – is today viewed suspiciously. A 2018 poll found 45% of Leave supporters believed the BBC was anti-Brexit (cited in Kakar 2018). But there was not a similar degree of mistrust among voters for other broadcasters who are also legally required to be impartial.

So why was the UK's main public service broadcaster, the BBC, singled out for its coverage? There has been no credible academic research produced to support the BBC being anti-Brexit. But there has been a sustained attack on the public broadcaster's reporting of Brexit by politicians and commercial competitors, in particular right-wing newspapers. A Sun headline, for example, claimed: "BIASED BEEB'S BREXIT BASHING BBC puts FOUR TIMES as many Remainers as Brexit fans on telly." Details about the study's method were lacking but it appeared deeply flawed, counting Remain voices as politicians or other sources who supported remaining in the EU *before* the referendum result. Since this represented more than half the cabinet, including the PM, who are actively implementing Brexit, it was clearly designed to claim BBC bias rather than objectively study the impartiality of coverage.

It is not only the right-wing media that are undermining the BBC's journalistic independence. Since 2015, there has been a rise of new left-wing online media in the UK which regularly draw attention to examples of perceived BBC bias. So, for example, a widely shared 2017 story in The Canary questioned the impartiality of BBC's political editor, Laura Kuenssberg, because she was listed as an "invited speaker" at the Conservative party conference. However, the headline could be viewed as misleading because while she had been invited to speak, she had not agreed. Although the story was corrected on The Canary's website, the tweet ("We need to talk about Laura Kuenssberg. She's listed as a speaker at the Tory Party conference") remained and was widely shared on Twitter and Facebook. This type of coverage prompted BBC presenter and former political editor, Nick Robinson (2017), to argue that: "Attacks on the media are no longer a lazy clap line delivered to a party conference to raise morale. They are part of a guerrilla war being fought on social media, day after day and hour after hour".

The undermining of journalistic independence is not exclusive to the BBC or the UK. In the US, for example, the rise of partisan media dates back decades, resulting in many people turning to news they ideologically agree with. However, the US is comparatively atypical: it has a hyper-commercialised media system, has evolved without a strong public service media sector and its broadcasters have no formal rules about regulating impartiality in news programming. The US, in this sense, represents a media system that many countries may follow if public service media are diminished.

Given the worldwide influence many public service broadcasters have had on editorial standards, the more aggressive ideological attack on their funding and independence represents a significant risk to journalism in the twenty-first century. Needless to say, public service media do not always succeed in delivering impartiality. There are legitimate criticisms about their ability to remain independent of the state and question institutional forms of power. However, there is also a large and growing body of scholarship that has empirically demonstrated public service media not only produce news of higher democratic value than their commercial rivals, they are more effective in raising people's knowledge and understanding of politics and public affairs (Curran et al 2009; Cushion 2012; Cushion 2018; Cushion and Thomas 2018).

As funding for public service media reduces and ideological opposition to its journalism increases, it is important that their democratic value is brought to the attention of

legislators and policy-makers. At a time when so-called fake news and disinformation is rife, there is a good case to make that their editorial resources and values should not only be safeguarded but enhanced in the digital age.

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